

Peter Hitt Controversy

In the last few years, I have discussed Peter Hitt with a number of Hitt Family researchers with mixed results and little or no proof. I have given the ancestry of Peter Hitt a lot of thought for a long time but the more I think about it, read other accounts, or discuss it with others, the harder it is for me to accept the "usual" approach to Peter Hitt's ancestry. It is not my intent to force anyone to accept my views on the subject; I am only interested in getting as many researchers as possible working to uncover everything available that might help solve this problem. If it is ever proven that Peter Hitt and Peter Heide/Heite are the same person, it automatically adds three or four generations to my Hitt family history.

PETER HITT 1714 IMMIGRANT TO GERMANNA IN THE VIRGINIA COLONY

By
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INTRODUCTION

One Hitt Family researcher¹ has found that there are at least five Hitt family lines which do not seem to be related in America. He has identified one line as that of Henry Hitt, b. ca. 1648, in Devonshire, England. This family came to America in 1665 with the first Governor of New Jersey, Governor Carteret. The second family line is that of Peter Hitt, the 1714 immigrant to the Virginia Colony at Germanna. The other three families include: the Rhode Island Hitts, 1723 to after 1900; and two families that came from England to America much later.

The basic references used by most researchers that have researched the Peter Hitt Family are the Germanna Records^{2,3}. Even so, there are some researchers who believe that there are several other possible solutions to the ancestry and marriage of Peter Hitt the 1714 immigrant, one of which is that of B.C. Holtzclaw described in the Germanna Records. However, there is much reason to doubt that Peter Hitt is the Peter Heite that was born in Rehbach, Siegen, Germany in 1682/83.

WHO IS PETER HITT ?

There is little doubt that Peter Hitt immigrated from Germany via England and that he most probably immigrated with the twelve families that were placed at Germanna in May 1714. Conspicuous by its absence is any connection of the surnames Hitt and Heite in America or in Germany. The Peter Hitt Family has always spelled their name Hitt never Heide/Heite. This becomes more puzzling when one notes the number of references to Heide/Heite in the Federal Census, the earliest occurring in Ohio in 1850 and in Pennsylvania in 1830, 1850 and 1860. None of these families have been found to be related to the Peter Hitt Family in America.

If Peter Hitt is Peter Heite then the first question is: how and when the name was changed from Heite, pronounced 'high-tee', to Hitt, pronounced 'hit'. When Peter Hitt immigrated to America, he could not read or write English. He used his "Mark" on all of his legal documents including his will. Therefore, it is logical to assume that he would have used the German pronunciation of his name whenever asked. Since the two names do not sound the same, or even similar, it would be difficult to assume that Heite was Anglicized to Hitt by colony officials. If the spelling were the problem, then why not Hitey, Hydie, Hide, Hite, or the many other possible variations? A second question is: why didn't Peter Hitt sign documents with the German form of his name? This would have been as acceptable to authorities as his mark. Is it possible that Peter Hitt could not read or write his native language?

There seems to be some evidence that the original 1714 colony had an extended stop-over in London on their journey to America. Since the Hitt name has been traced in England back to the 16th century, is it possible that this was the origin of the name or, that Peter's name was Anglicized in England prior to the colony departing for America? Unfortunately, there are no ship passenger lists nor have any records been found for Peter Hitt or Peter Heide/Heite from 1707 until April 1714. The last record for Peter Heite/Heide was that of his marriage to Maria Liessbeth Freudenberg on Epiphany Sunday in 1707 in Germany. The earliest record of Peter Hitt is in April 1714 in the Virginia Colony when he and eleven other German families were placed at Germanna.

Holtzclaw cites Moultrie Hitt and Dr. William J. Hinkle in his attempt to support his theory that Peter Hitt and Peter Heite are one and the same person. Holtzclaw neglects, however, to mention Jessie Martin Hitt (Washington State Librarian and an early Hitt researcher 1852-1931) who collected a great number of documents relating to the Hitt families in America.⁴ Holtzclaw does cite Prof. William I. Utterback as having "... 7 pages on the Hitt family, culled from records of the Nicholas Church in Siegen". Prof. Utterback's notes seems to have disappeared, and although their contents are unknown, Holtzclaw says: "These church records would no doubt have given information about the parents and brothers and sisters of Peter Hitt". In one or two paragraphs, Holtzclaw has made the transition from Heite to Hitt without the benefit of any documentation or proof.

THE MARRIAGE OR MARRIAGES OF PETER HITT.

There are a number of theories on the marriage of Peter Hitt. All of these theories are possible but have not or cannot be proven. Several of the theories depend upon the assumption that Peter Hitt is the man named Peter Heide/Heite.

One theory is that Peter had only one wife and that wife was Maria Liessbeth Freudenberg whom he married on Epiphany Sunday in 1707; that they immigrated to the Virginia colony in 1714 and were the parents of the children born 1715 - 1726. There are some problems with this theory. Maria Liessbeth Freudenberg (b. 1674) was 33 years old when she married Peter Heite and there are no records of any children of this marriage. If Maria Liessbeth is the mother of Peter Hitt's children, she would have been 41 years old when the first child was born and 52 when the last child was born. Having had no previous children, this is clearly improbable and must be rejected. In addition, Peter Hitt's wife is known to have been living in 1772 when he made his will in Fauquier County, Virginia. If Maria Liessbeth and the Elizabeth named in Peter Hitt's will were the same person, Maria Liessbeth would have been 98 years old when Peter Hitt's will was probated in 1772; possible but very unlikely.

A second theory is that advanced by B. C. Holtzclaw³. Holtzclaw does not believe that Maria Liessbeth and Elizabeth (of Peter Hitt's will) are the same person. His belief was so strong that he searched for another wife for Peter Hitt and decided, without proof, that it was Elizabeth Otterbach, b. 1689, daughter of Herman Otterbach. Again, possible but unproven. No record has been found of Maria's death and no record has been found of the marriage of Peter Hitt and Elizabeth Otterbach.

A third theory has Peter Hitt marrying Maria Liessbeth in 1707 and Maria dying in England before they could continue their trip to America. Peter then marries Elizabeth James, an English lady, before the colony departs for America. This theory is also possible but, to date, no death or marriage records have been found.

A fourth theory is that Peter Hitt, of German descent, was already in England when the 1714 Colony was forced to delay their trip to America. Peter very possibly was a relative of the English line of Hitts that have been traced back to the 15th century or earlier. Peter married an English woman, perhaps Elizabeth James, or one of the single women in the colony, perhaps Elizabeth Otterbach. This would imply that Peter and his wife could have been a young newly married couple when they departed England for America and, would explain the fact that they had no children when they arrived in the Virginia Colony. To date no records have been found to substantiate this theory.

A fifth theory is that advanced by Jessie Martin Hitt and at least one other author, who believed that Peter Hitt's wife was Elizabeth James. Jesse Martin Hitt⁴ did not indicate the place of birth or the marriage date of Peter Hitt and Elizabeth James. The Compendium of American Genealogy⁵ states that Peter Hitt (1682-1771) came from Germany to London, England, in 1713, then to Germanna, Virginia, in 1714, and married in 1714 Elizabeth James (b.1682). Neither of the above authors offer proof of their statements.

The sixth and final possibility, although there are probably as many theories as there are people investigating the Peter Hitt family, is that Peter Hitt, of German descent, joined the 1714 colony in Germany or England and came to America a single man. He married one of the women of the colony, named Elizabeth, after arrival in Virginia; her parentage is unknown, so you can make your own choice.

Some researchers cite the court proceedings held in Spotsylvania County on 2 July 1724 as proving that Peter Hitt was married to Maria Liessbeth when he immigrated in 1714. This can only be viewed as an assumption and is a good example of the improper use of "primary records". The court appearance of Peter Hitt and the other 1714 immigrants was for the sole purpose of obtaining land under the "headright" laws of the Virginia Colony. The following is an abstract of the 1724 court proceeding:

*Att adCourt held Fr Adjournment from yesterday
the 2 day of June 1724: for Spotsylvania County*

Present
Augustine Smith William Bivasfor?
Goodrich Lightfoot Edwin Hickman Gentn Justices

...

...

John Spilman in order to prove his right to take up land according to the Royale charter made oath that he came into this collony to dwell in the year 1714 and that he brought with him his wife Mary and that this is the first time of proveing their said Importation whereupon certificate is ordered to be granted them to take up one hundred acres of Land

Harmon ffishback in order to prove his right to take up land according to the Royale charter made oath that he came into this collony to dwell in the year 1714; and that he brought with him Katherina his wife and that this is the first time of proveing their said importation, whereupon certificate is ordered to be granted them of Right to take up one hundred acres of Land

John Huffman the same order for himself and Katherina his wife

Present Jno Taliaferro Gent
Joseph Cuntz the same order for himself and Katherina his wife, and his son John, Annalis and Katherina his daughters

John ffishback the same order for himself and Agnis his wife

John Rickart the same order for himself and Elisabeth his wife & his son John

Melchoir Brumback the same order for himself and his wife Elisabeth

Tilman Weaver the same order for himself and Anna Weaver his mother

Likewise Peter Hitt the same order for himself and Elisabeth his wife

...

...

The certificates were issued 30 May 1729.

It should not be concluded, from the oaths taken in court, that all of the 1714 immigrants were married when they came to the Virginia Colony. It is known that this is not the case as several of the men were not married; for example, John Huffman (Hoffman). John Hoffman did not marry until 7 November 1721; seven years after he and his future wife, Catherine Haeger, immigrated to America. Neither should we conclude that Peter Hitt's oath be taken as proof that he was married to Maria Liessbeth Freudenberg when he came to the Virginia Colony. Further, it is not believed that the men who took the oaths "lied under oath". It is more likely, due primarily to their inability to read and write English, that they believed it unimportant that some of them were single when they immigrated. It is even more likely that the Court was only interested in the fact that each immigrant and his current wife had been imported into the Virginia Colony and were entitled to land under Colonial law⁶.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions that can be drawn from the evidence are not satifying and tend to show our lack of knowledge of the Peter Hitt family prior to 1714. But some things are evident:

1. German records do show³ that on Epiphany Sunday 1707 Peter Heite, son of Jacob Heite of Rehbach, married Maria Liessbeth Freudenberg of Ferndorf. This is most likely a correct and accurate statement. It, however does not prove that Peter Hitt is Peter Heite.
2. There is reason to believe that Peter Hitt is not Peter Heide/Heite. Nothing definitive has been found, to date, identifying Peter Hitt as Peter Heite.
3. The theories and possibilities concerning the marriage of Peter Hitt are almost unlimited.
4. About the only facts about Peter Hitt and his family that can be proven are:
 - o Peter Hitt is of German descent

- Peter Hitt was among those imported and placed at Germanna with other German families in 1714.
- Peter Hitt married a woman named Elizabeth who was still living when Peter's will was probated in 1772 and this Elizabeth was the mother of Peter Hitt's children born 1715 - 1726.

The truth about Peter Hitt's ancestry has yet to be proven and is a subject that family historians continue to argue and investigate. One thing is certain, it will take the discovery of new information to finally establish the ancestors of Peter Hitt.

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3. Germanna Record No. 5, Ancestry and Descendants of the Nassau-Siegen Immigrants to Virginia 1714-1750; published by the Memorial Foundation of the Germanna Colonies in Virginia, Inc., Culpeper, Virginia; 1964.
4. The Jesse Martin Hitt Collection. Jesse Martin Hitt (1652-1931) was Librarian for the State of Washington at Olympia and was an early Hitt Family researcher. His collection of papers and documents are located at the Washington State Library, Olympia, Washington. An unpublished manuscript, believed to be based upon the Collection, can be found in Los Angeles Public Library.
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Last Updated on December 16, 1997